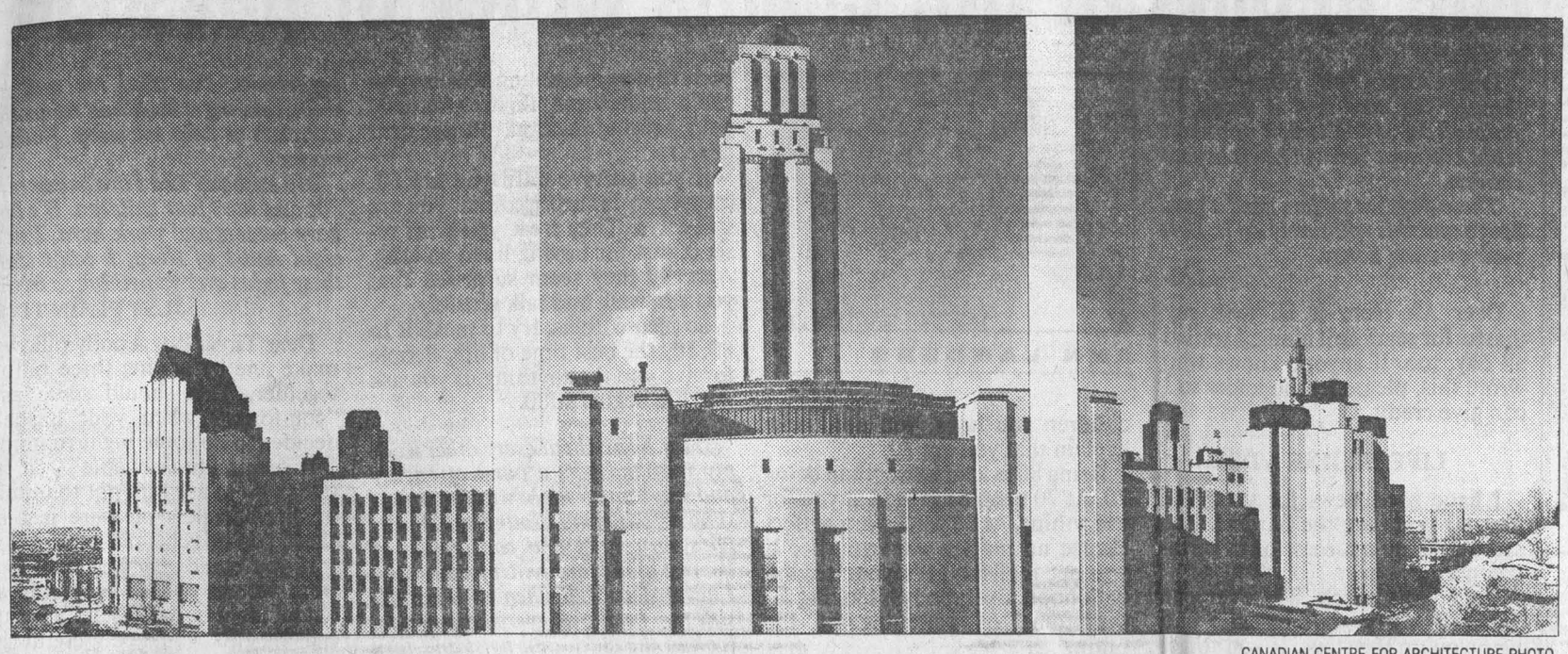
ARCHITECTURE



CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE PHOTO

New book of architecture criticism gives background to various aspects of architect Ernest Cormier's towers and peaks at Université de Montréal.

Keeping score in Canadian architecture

Work on design scene mixes lively profiles with criticism

ANNMARIE ADAMS
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Architectural criticism is a bit like sportscasting. Critics use their quick eye and their familiarity with the teams to point out the subtle plays, the surprising upsets and the major strategies that we might otherwise miss from the stands or from tuning in late.

Adele Freedman's new book, *Sight Lines: Looking at Architecture and Design in Canada* (Oxford University Press, 1990; $19.95) is a masterful play-by-play account of the complex game of architecture.

The author is architecture critic of Toronto's Globe and Mail and the book is a collection of her favorite articles, grouped thematically. Its three sections are national in scope.

Freedman begins with a tantalizing look at the world of architecture through the swinging social scene of the 1950s. The first section is a gripping and gossipy account of British architect Peter Dickinson's short but influential career in Canada. It is a revised and expanded version of Freedman's award-winning article on this important Modernist and his wife, Vera, who "romped through Toronto like a pair of hellers, he a reckless artist, she his wild accomplice."

Driven by ambition

Dickinson was not a brilliant designer, as Freedman points out; still, he was responsible for many of the most important postwar buildings in Canada, first as an architect with Page and Steele and later on his own. O'Keefe Centre in Toronto and Montreal's Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce tower on Dorchester Square are two of his best known buildings. His firm became Webb, Zerafa, Menkes and Housden.

Freedman presents us with a portrait of Dickinson as a man driven by ambition. His office motto was to fill the spaces between the masterpieces. He was passionate about building; he never slept; he was fiercely competitive; he wanted to put a building on every corner in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. He died at 35, having made a good start.

Vivid picture

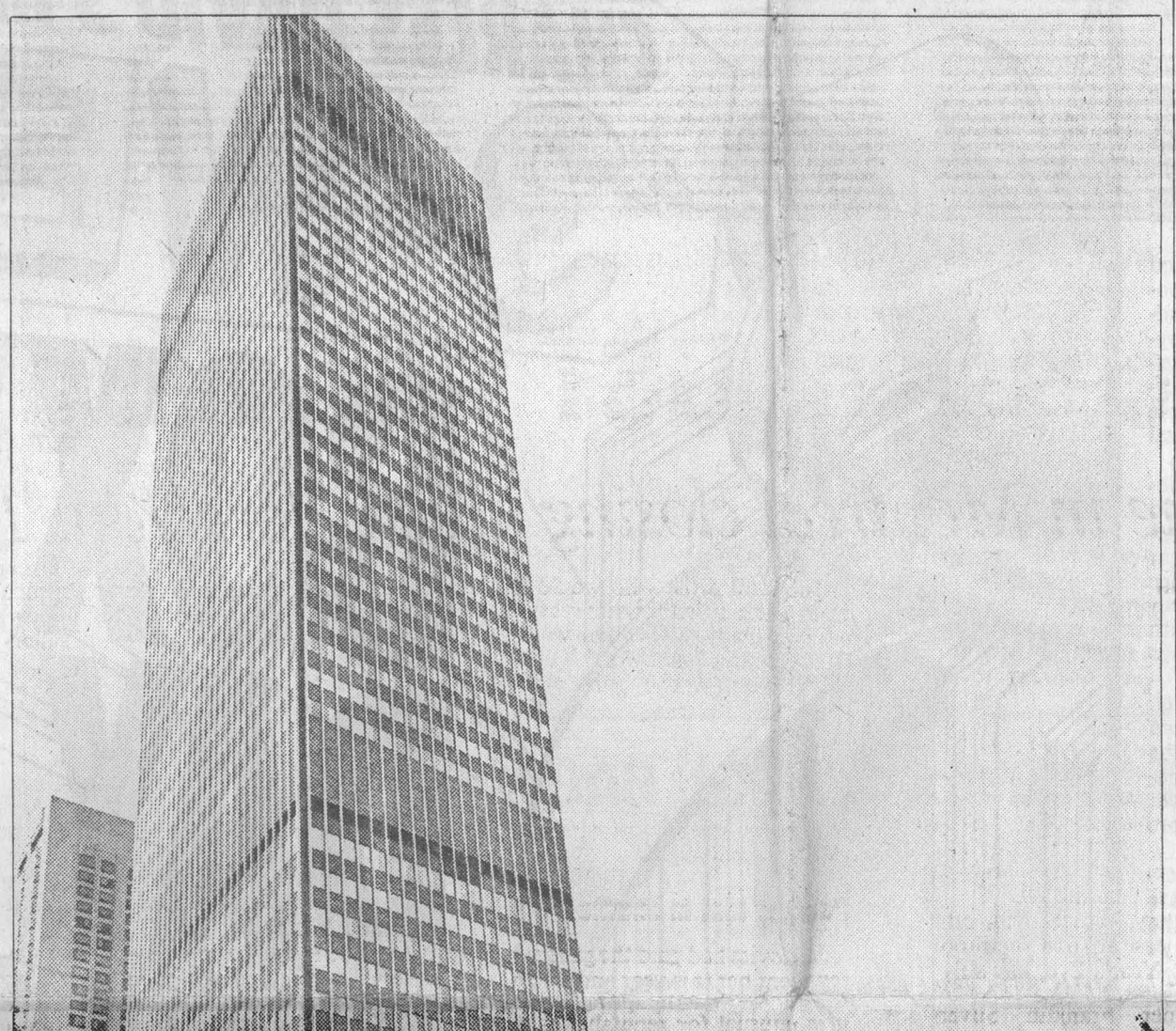
Freedman's essay on Dickinson is first-rate architectural criticism. She gives us a vivid picture of the man behind the buildings, as well as a fascinating glimpse of the architectural profession in the post-war years. We can smell the scotch Dickinson loved; we can imagine him disappearing into a bedroom during parties to draw; and we cannot avoid feeling a sense of loss at his death.

Would Canadian cities be different had he lived? Maybe.

"People," the second section of *Sight Lines,* is also an exploration of the personalities responsible for Canadian architecture. The group Freedman writes about is necessarily diverse, reflecting her view of architecture as an entire culture, extending far beyond a traditional view of the profession. Author Jane Jacobs, decorator Herbert Levine, furniture designer Michele De Lucchi and critic Ada Louise Huxtable are as vital to the process of making cities as the cast of well-known architects included in this section.

Throughout these shorter articles Freedman also highlights the important roles that patrons have played in both the careers of architects and in the design process. Architecture, for her, is a game of power and influence as much as it is about bricks and mortar. And she is not afraid to uncover this aspect of the sport.

It is in this understanding of architecture as a social process — as a carefully negotiated agreement between various people, rather than as the product of the solitary architect — that Freedman's strength as a critic lies. The people she writes about all have a part to play in the design of buildings and cities; some simply have more important roles than others.



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

CIBC building in downtown Montreal among leading-edge buildings discussed in Adele Freeman's new book.

Freedman is predictably tough on Prince Charles, who has recently entered her profession of architectural criticism rather suddenly — through the royal door. The heir to the throne displays "pitiful ignorance," according to Freedman. Her essay on Prince Charles should serve as a how-to lesson in criticism to the prince. It is a penetrating analysis of the danger of his power as royal observer of the built environment.

"Sites and Issues" is the third and final section of the book and will satisfy readers yearning for traditional architectural criticism. Major commissions of the 1980s — the National Gallery, Mississauga City Hall, the Canadian Embassy in Washington and others are the focus of Freedman's critical eye. But the high points of this final section of the book are the "tours" of Canadian cities guided by people who know and love them.

We accompany Freedman and painter Christopher Pratt through St. John's; landscape architect Michael Hough offers a delightful tour of Toronto; and developer Alan Singer shows us Calgary.

Witold Rybczynski Profiled in work

Montreal is represented in the book by essays on both people and places. Biographical sketches of Phyllis Lambert, Moishe Safdie, Ernest Cormier and Witold Rybczynski, and critical essays on the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, Cormier's own house and several other private residences, provide a fascinating view of our city. Montreal's architecture is as diverse as those who design, build, think and write about it.

Sight Lines could only have improved with more photographs to accompany Freedman's smooth prose. Also, the book might have gained the conviction of a single volume had some of the other pieces been revised and expanded, like the Dickinson essay. As is, the articles are short and all tend to be the same length; their depth, as a result, is relatively predictable.

Anyone with a general interest in Canadian cities will thoroughly enjoy this book. Freedman's scintillating commentary allows us to sit back and enjoy the complex world of design in Canada, convincing us more than ever that in architecture, it is both whether you win or lose and how you play the game that counts.

■ *Annmarie Adams is assistant professor at the McGill University school of architecture.*

Canadian Art magazine goes green for an issue

IAN BAILEY
CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO — Mendelson Joe says he tries to paint pictures about the environment that are as profound as a policy paper or the picket sign he carries once a week.

"Your art has to be relevant to your policies in life," says Joe, who marches once a week in front of Ontario Hydro's downtown Toronto headquarters protesting the province's reliance on nuclear power.

"You have ignorant artists and concerned artists and artists who have some thoughts. We're like the rest of society," says the 46-year-old Toronto native, who labels himself a painter-songwriter-musician.

Jocelyn Laurence, editor of *Canadian Art* magazine, agrees. That's why she's handed over her winter edition — now available on newsstands — to artists like Joe.

When the magazine's 23,000 readers open their glossy copies, they will find an art gallery on paper — 47 pictures of environmentally themed art under the overall title Visons of our Endangered Planet.

The paintings, sculptures and sketches were selected from 1,000 solicited over the past few months from galleries across Canada.

They include a coat made from plastic Christmas trees and called Visions. And there's a linocut of a tree stump weighed down by a cinder block and called Anchor.

There's also The Basics: Joe's painting of a bird's nest floating above a darkened countryside.

"The painting represents the basics of what's necessary to survive: a home, the land and the sky," he says.

Images of art aren't unusual in *Canadian Art,* but they usually share space with text. Aside from Laurence's introduction, ads and captions, there are no words this time.

Laurence, a former editor at *Toronto Life* and *Chatelaine,* says there's an easy link between activism and visual arts.

"We've been wrecking the environment for decades. Artists are intelligent people who recognize that. Part of their role is to point the way on issues, as it is for writers."

But for all its good intentions, the magazine isn't exactly environment-friendly, as Laurence admits in an editorial.

This issue, like all previous ones, isn't printed on recycled paper, because the publishers can't afford the stuff. And copies can't even be recycled because of the inks used.

CP

Jocelyn Laurence's winter edition features art on environmental theme.

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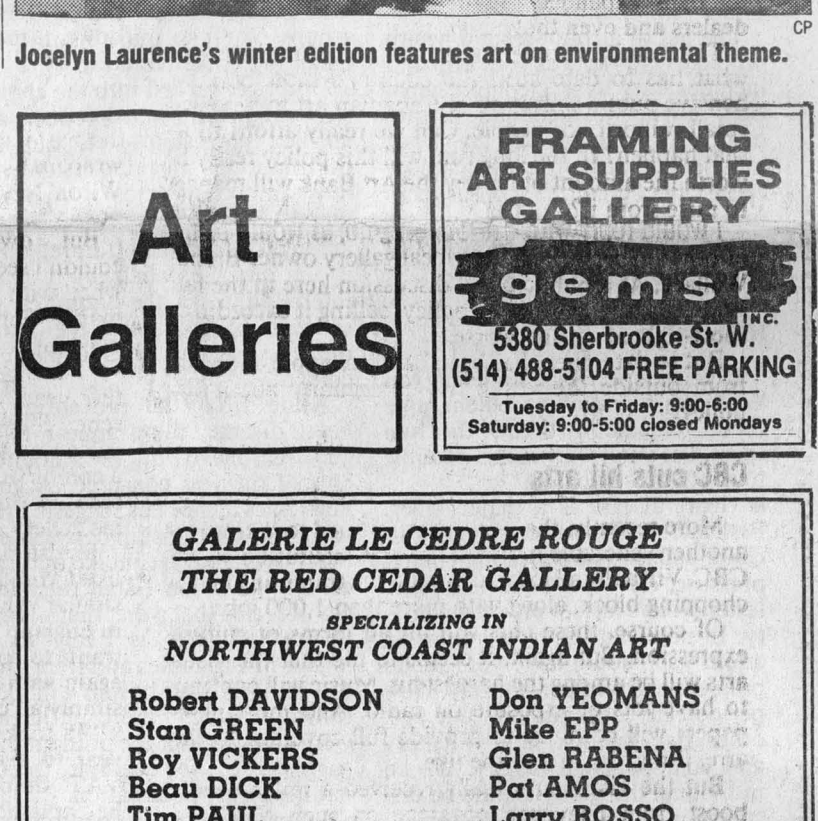
JASPER JOHNS
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Don't miss "Focus on Computers"
a feature every Wednesday in the Business section.